DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 080 CS 214 278

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TITLE Composition and Rhetoric: A Natural Alliance.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Analysis; *English Departments; Higher Education; *Rhetoric; Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Classical Rhetoric; *Composition Theory; Controversy; Departmental Politics; Process Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

Writing teachers and theorists face political and pedagogical dangers because of their increasing tendency to align themselves against each other on the side of either rhetoric or composition. As the differences between the two schools widens, writing teachers stand to lose political ground in English departments and their students stand to lose the benefits of a balanced approach to writing. To borrow the terms of Walter H. Beale, the "The Second Rhetorical Awakening," presently in process, is obscuring the advances of the "The First Rhetorical Awakening," which occurred during the mid sixties around the time of Edward P. J. Corbett's "Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student" (1965). While the first wave of rhetorical awareness reminded teachers that writing is a culturally conditioned practice, growing out of a need to address a particular audience, recent discussion of composition pedagogy emphasizes process to the exclusion of concerns about audience and purpose. According to David Blakesley, composition pedagogy carries an ideological edge in its emphasis on sincerity or authenticity, which encourages a carefully mannered, plain style like that of E. B. White. The insights of composition pedagogy should not be lost; nevertheless the means of writing should not take precedence over its ends. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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Composition and Rhetoric: A Natural Alliance?

Many people at this conference are familiar with Maxine Hairston's address as Chair of CCCC in 1985, "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections." In that address, which was subsequently published in CCC, Hairston called on those in rhetoric and composition to break the bonds, primarily psychological but perhaps also physical and economic, that bind those in rhetoric and composition to English departments, especially English departments dominated by literary scholars in traditional literary programs. To sum up Hairston's argument, those literary departments exploit teachers of rhetoric and composition for economic advantage but show no respect to their colleagues who do the major work in the department.

Many of us in rhetoric and composition have made Hairston's words a rallying cry: we have worked to increase our political power within departments, and in some cases we have even created our own departments, independent of English. However, recent trends in the teaching of writing have led me to wonder if we were too readily accepting a hidden assumption in this scenario: the assumption that rhetoric and composition are one field, or at least a natural alliance. Certainly it is easy for us in rhetoric and composition to ally ourselves when we are fighting against the big bad literati, but I am not sure that the alliance of rhetoricians and composition specialists is as solid and as comfortable as many of us assume. Indeed, the recent rise of process pedagogy to prominence in the teaching of writing leads me to believe that this alliance between rhetoric and

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composition may not be very firm and that the two could be headed for a split--one that would be harmful to us and to our students.

I would like to explain the relationship of rhetoric and composition in English departments, reviewing the rise of rhetoric and then of process pedagogy, and then I would like to speculate on the possible direction that the teaching of writing could take if present trends continue. I see a potential danger in this situation for all of us.

If I may rely on personal experience for a moment, I would like to recall the excitement that was generated by the publication of Edward P.J. Corbett's first edition of Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student in 1965. I was just an instructor in the freshman writing program at the University of Nebraska, but I and the whole contingent of graduate students sensed that the teaching of writing would be changed forever. The perspective of classical rhetoric gave writing a context. No longer would writing be merely a classroom exercise in which freshmen explained what they did last summer, defined the meaning of friendship, or argued (for no one in particular) that the drinking age should be lowered to eighteen. Rather writing and writing assignments would take place in a context in which a writer wrote to a specific audience with the purpose of affecting the state of affairs in the world. The concept of audience, which rhetoric added to writing tasks, provided both a purpose for writing and a standard by which writing was to be judged. (You should also remember that most of us doctoral candidates were studying literature - what else was there to study? - and that our dominant vision of writing was the expressionism of British Romanticism. Thus, the introduction of the

notion of audience was absolutely astonishing and revolutionary.

Not only did the revival of classical rhetoric introduce the notion of audience in the composition class, but it also introduced the notion that composing is a process. As Patricia Bizzell suggests, the classical canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery provided a "multistage composing process," and teachers of writing soon came to emphasize invention in its modern forms: prewriting or generating ideas (60). Indeed, the notion of invention--a systematic process for creating ideas--was nothing short of astonishing to those of us who had accepted as gospel Wordsworth's claim that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...recollected in tranquillity...." According to classical rhetorical theory, one did not have to wait for moments of inspiration in order to write.

Further, as Bizzell points out, classical rhetoric makes writing meaningful by placing it in a social context:

> Classical rhetoric assumes that the function of writing is not to express oneself but to effect change in the human community.... Hence, the ability to suit one's style to the particular audience...becomes art, not hypocrisy. Classical rhetoric invites discussion of the social and political uses of writing in ways that personal-style pedagogy...never could. (60-61)

In effect, Corbett and those who explored the implications of what he said about classical rhetoric had a model that made writing seem meaningful and even useful in the world outside of college.

Classical rhetoric, though, is no longer <u>avant garde</u> in our

profession, nor is it even at the center of the teaching of writing. Rather, process pedagogy--an emphasis on composing in stages, writing recursively, and producing multiple drafts--is probably at the center of the profession both in theory (and its accompanying publication) and in practice in composition classrooms. Janet Emig's discovery that students don't compose the way textbooks used to say they did has led to extensive and intensive studies of how writers actually compose. Scholars like Linda Flower have produced many excellent insights into how writers actually compose. And these insights have helped us to nurture many inexperienced writers who have come to realize that they could learn to write--that there were actual steps they could take to generate material, organize material, improve both content and organization, and then improve their style, mechanics, and force. We have all learned a great deal from process pedagogy.

However, in favoring the process approach to composing, we as a profession may be overlooking, ignoring, or even contradicting what we learned from rhetoric. There are a number of potential traps or pitfalls in the process approach. For one, as Arthur Applebee points out, the "vogue for process-oriented approaches is...a clear instance of research driving practice" (96). Because research in composing can easily become behavioral and produce ready data, it has an appeal as "scientific" research. Further, as Applebee says, these descriptions of the writing processes of skilled writers have led to easy prescriptions for novice writers: teach them to compose like skilled writers. But, as Applebee goes on to suggest, "...the prescription is seriously inadequate" (96). We don't really know if the process leads ultimately to the product we admire in skilled writers. For another,

process approaches, with their emphasis on expressive writing, often lead us back to the kind of writing assignments students were doing before Ed Corbett rediscovered classical rhetoric. Susan McLeod states the case well:

> And yet even the newest process-oriented textbooks still have such writing topics as "describe a place that has some special meaning for you." Naturally, we must then emphasize pre-writing techniques...to find something to say about such inert topics. Some of these process texts then go on to tell students to choose an audience and a purpose for their writing - something that almost never happens in writing tasks outside academe, where audience and aim are the first considerations. (18)

As McLeod is saying, writing often becomes an academic exercise for its own sake. Finally, as David Blakesley (among others) points out, the emphasis on process pedagogy often has a political or ideological edge to it (5). The ideal becomes the "authentic voice" or what we used to call "sincerity," a voice that ideally liberates the student from oppressive social, economic, and political constraints. Unfortunately, as Bizzell points out, this authentic writing is actually the carefully mannered plain style of writers like Orwell and E.B. White (55).

Whether the impetus of process pedagogy is from purely disinterested motives or not, it is a powerful impetus that is growing even stronger all the time. Indeed, Walter H. Beale has termed this movement "The Second Rhetorical Awakening"--to contrast it with "The First Rhetorical Awakening," the earlier movement led by such figures

as Richard Weaver, Corbett, and perhaps even Kenneth Burke. And this Second Awakening has, as Beale puts it, "taken directions antithetical and in some cases openly hostile to rhetoric as previously understood" (636). Beale argues that to see process as an end itself is sloppy thinking that will lead to confusion: it elevates means over ends (637).

The political danger for our profession is that we, allies in the battle to make the teaching of writing an important and respectable intellectual activity, may break off into factions: the empiricists who study process on one side and the humanist rhetoricians on the other side. Many speech departments split that way in the 1950's and 1960's, creating warring factions who gave up trying to communicate with each other and instead began writing specialized articles for those who shared their biases. (See Ehninger's Contemporary Rhetoric for a view of this split.) Such a split in our profession would seriously endanger the great political strides we have made over the last twenty-five years.

But an even greater danger to us and to the students we teach is the possibility of the process view either overwhelming or marginalyzing the rhetorical view of writing. Susan Miller in Rescuing the Subject has argued that our modern study of writing is not really descended from rhetoric, and she is probably right. Nevertheless, the study of rhetoric, especially classical rhetoric, has been an invigorating force in composition studies. It has, moreover, provided our efforts with theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that we cannot afford to lose.

My particular bias is in favor of classical rhetoric, though I

would admit that classical rhetoric has shortcomings. I would argue, nevertheless, that classical rhetoric is quite a useful tool for looking at problems of human discourse (especially if we are willing to modify traditional postulates with empirical data). But what rhetoric does that process can never do is to separate means from ends, to judge on the moral and human worth of particular ends, and to unify and evaluate the diverse elements in a rhetorical situation. It is in these issues of larger import that classical rhetoricians and modern rhetoricians as different as Richard Weaver and Kenneth Burke agree in seeing what Beale calls "the constitutive link between discourse and culture" (628). If we lose sight of the importance of rhetoric in composition studies, we stand in danger of forgetting what writing is for.

In sum, however accurate and detailed our knowledge of the writing process becomes and however skilled we become in applying our findings to our students, we must recognize that process deals with means. It can never tell us what our ends should be. Process may tell us how to write, but it can never tell us why we should write. Perhaps rhetoric can.

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